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HISTORY

OF THE

ANCIENT

WORLD

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A History of Byzantium

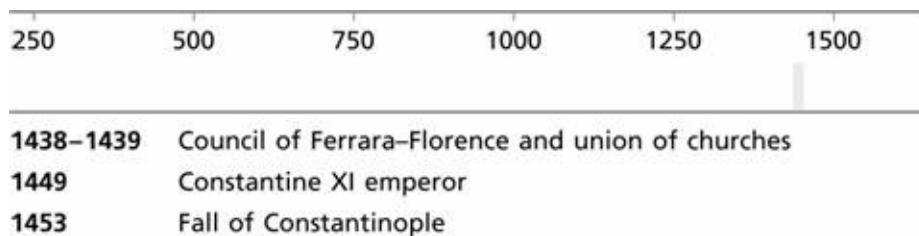
Second Edition

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The End of the Empire



The Reign of John VIII Palaiologos

On July 21, 1425, the emperor Manuel II Palaiologos died at the age of 75. His passing was deeply mourned by his subjects, for he had preserved them, more or less without harm, but also without bowing to the demands of the West or raising again the specter of submission of the Byzantine church to the papacy.

Manuel was succeeded by his son John VIII Palaiologos (1425–48), who inherited a multitude of problems. Perhaps the most stable portion of the empire was the Morea, where, indeed, three of his brothers then resided. But the situation in Thrace had recently become much more serious. Thessaloniki had been in Venetian hands since 1423, and there was some hope that, under their control, it would again become a wealthy center of trade and culture. But there was dissension within the city, and the Venetians despaired of maintaining its defenses, so the situation was bleak when Murad brought his forces before the walls in March of 1430. Many citizens wished to surrender immediately, but the Venetians demanded that the city be defended – before sailing off to safety in their ships. After a short siege, Thessaloniki fell and was subject to a terrible sack; the early Christian church of the Acheiropoietos was turned into a mosque. The second city of the Byzantine Empire had fallen to the Turks.

Sinan Pasha, the Ottoman governor-general in Europe, moved against Ioannina in Epiros. Unlike the population of Thessaloniki, the people of Ioannina accepted Sinan Pasha's offer of surrender, and as a result they exchanged their freedom for the protection of their property, churches, and lives.

The twin Ottoman successes of 1430 seriously frightened the western powers, especially Venice and Hungary. The ruler of the semi-independent Serbian Despotate was now Durad (George) Branković, nephew of Stefan Lazarović and he swore loyalty to King Sigismund of Hungary and made preparations to withstand the Ottoman onslaught from a new fortified capital at Smederevo on the Danube near Belgrade.

The Despotate of the Morea in the Fifteenth Century

The Despotate of the Morea, with its capital at Mystras (close to ancient Sparta), flourished politically and culturally in the fifteenth century and provided one ray of optimism in the military difficulties of the age. Born of a fusion of Crusader and Byzantine culture in the years after the Fourth Crusade, the Despotate of the Morea came to be ruled as an *appanage* (essentially an independent territory linked by family ties to Constantinople) by junior members of the imperial family. The castle of Mystras, just a short distance west of ancient Sparta, was built in 1248 by William II Villehardouin, the Frankish prince of Achaia, to guard the plain of Lakonia from the wild tribes that dwelled on Mount Taygetos. The castle was surrendered to the Byzantines in 1262 (after the Battle of Pelagonia), and a city soon grew up below it, as the inhabitants of Sparta fled there to enjoy the greater protection of the fortifications. It was ruled at first by governors who were changed every year, but from 1308 onward they held office for longer periods. These governors were important individuals, first the father of the future emperor John Kantakouzenos, and then Andronikos Asen, son of the former tsar of Bulgaria and greatnephew of Andronikos II. John VI created the Despotate of the Morea in 1349 and appointed his son Manuel Kantakouzenos to a long rule there. John V then appointed Theodore I Palaiologos, who ruled from 1381 to 1407, and from then on the despotate was an *appanage* of the Palaiologan family. From 1407 until its capture by the Turks, the despotate was ruled by the sons of the emperor Manuel II, first Theodore II (1407–43), then the future emperor Constantine XI (1443–9), and finally

Thomas and Demetrios Palaiologos (1449–60). By 1429 the despotate had gained control of most of the Peloponnese, but the Ottomans took advantage of competition among the sons of Manuel II to raid the Morea, despite continued efforts to fortify and defend the Isthmus of Corinth.

In the early fifteenth century Byzantine culture experienced a significant revival at Mystras, sparked in part by the cultural mixtures that had characterized the area and also, perhaps, the freedom the city enjoyed from the intellectual domination of the capital. Writers, philosophers, architects, and painters gathered in Mystras to enjoy the patronage of the despot and the wealthy families and monasteries of the city. Many churches were constructed, representing a blend of traditions and, perhaps, even consciously pointing back to the tradition of the early Christian basilica. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the churches of Mystras were painted in a style that was possibly the most lively and realistic of the Byzantine period. The artists, whose names are unknown, used colors that were lighter and more varied than those normally seen in Byzantine art, and many of the compositions sought to convey emotion and psychological subtlety. Mystras was also clearly a city of some size for the period and today its streets, monasteries, and palaces provide the visitor with some idea of what a late Byzantine city might have been like. In addition (as mentioned in Box 11.1), the many houses that survive in reasonably good condition provide an idea of aristocratic dwellings of the period. These surely contrasted with the simple houses of the agricultural poor of the time, but their spacious reception rooms and ornately decorated balconies convey a rare physical sense of the life of the wealthy of the time. Many of these houses imitate, on a lesser scale, the palaces of the despots (three survive, in various stages of repair and restoration), in their layout and their combination of western (both Gothic and Italian) architectural decoration.

Figure 15.1 Mystras. View through an arch over a roadway. Many houses are visible, and at the top are the remains of the castle built by William II Villehardouin in the thirteenth century. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



Figure 15.2 Agioi Theodoroi, Mystras. This church is one of the largest and most imposing at Mystras. Part of the Vrontonchion monastery, it was constructed toward the end of the thirteenth century. Like Daphni, the *katholikon* of Osios Loukas, Nea Moni on Chios, and a few other buildings, it is a domed octagon. Its huge dome rests on a system of squinches that throw its weight outward to the walls, creating an enormous interior space. Unfortunately, nearly all the interior decoration of the church has been destroyed. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



The emperor Manuel II and his son Theodore, who was despot after 1408,

were strong supporters of intellectual life at Mystras, where the culture was a blend of classical and traditional religious and even monastic traditions. Among the intellectuals who lived and worked at the court in Mystras were Isidore, later bishop of Kiev; Bessarion, later bishop of Nicaea (both of whom became cardinals in the Roman church); and Georgios Scholarios, who, as Gennadeios II, became the first patriarch of Constantinople under Ottoman rule. The greatest of these intellectuals, however, was the philosopher Georgios Gemistos, who took the surname Plethon in imitation of Plato (Platon in Greek), whom he admired and sought to follow. Plethon already had a distinguished career behind him, as an intellectual and adviser to the emperor, when he arrived in Mystras by 1409. He wrote voluminously, and most of his works are on strictly philosophical topics, but, like Plato before him, he felt he had a real political duty to promote his ideas for the well-being (or even the salvation) of society.

Plethon was not the first of the Byzantines to point out the connection between Byzantine and ancient Greek culture, but he put that point eloquently and clearly. “We are,” he wrote, “Greeks [Hellenes], as our language and ancestral culture show.” Thus, to Plethon, as to many Byzantines, Greekness was not a matter of blood or descent, but rather determined by language and culture. Plethon was also willing to call himself a Hellene, the term that had long been used by the Byzantines to refer to pagans. This did not trouble him and, unlike most of his contemporaries, he was unabashedly in favor of the (certainly impossible) task of restoring classical paganism as the religion of the empire!

Figure 15.3 Preparation of the Throne. Fresco, Perivleptos, Mystras. Third quarter of fourteenth century. This tiny jewel of a church, concealed in a cleft in the rock toward the edge of the city of Mystras, is a treasure of late Byzantine painting for those who make their way there. The paintings in the church do not display the riot of color found in some of the other churches of Mystras, but they convey a deep, moody religiosity, often dark but also infused with great outbursts of light. A perfect example is this scene of the preparation of the throne for Christ at the Last Judgement and put into place by a multitude of angels. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



Plethon was apparently moved by what he saw at Mystras, and he regarded the Morea (Peloponnesos) as a possible center for a revived Hellenism which would, in turn, help revive the whole of the Byzantine Empire. He wrote:

No country can be found which is more intimately and closely connected with the Greeks than is the Peloponnesos... It is a country which the same Greek stock has always inhabited, as far back as human memory goes; no other people had settled there before them, nor have immigrants occupied it subsequently... On the contrary, Greeks have always occupied this country as their own, and while they have emigrated from it, owing to the pressure of population, and have occupied other and not inconsiderable territories, they have never abandoned it. (Nicol, *Last Centuries*, p. 343)

Plethon also proposed real policies for the defense of the Peloponnesos and the revival of the empire. Some of these were eminently practical, such as repairing the defense of the Isthmus of Korinth and creating a standing army of native soldiers, but others were impossible to realize, such as the prohibition of private property and the creation of an authoritarian monarchy. He recommended that one-third of all produce be given to the state and drew up proposals for the encouragement of trade and domestic industry. Thus, he clearly felt that the domination of Byzantium by foreign economic interests and those of the Byzantine wealthy few were at the heart of the weakness of the Byzantine state. Needless to say, there was never a chance that these latter reforms would ever be implemented.

The Council of Ferrara–Florence and the Crusade of Varna

After 1430 the emperor John VIII was emboldened to hope that aid from the West might really be forthcoming, and he entered into negotiations with the papacy. This was, of course, a period of considerable disagreement in the western church, when the so-called Conciliarists sought to take power away from the pope and put it in the hands of church councils. This was a point of view similar to that held by the Byzantine church, and John hoped that the Conciliarists might be especially sympathetic to the position of the eastern church. Byzantine emissaries therefore responded positively to Pope Eugenius IV's invitation of November 1437 to attend a council that was to meet at Ferrara in Italy.

The Byzantine delegation was distinguished indeed: it included the patriarch, Joseph II (the first patriarch of Constantinople to attend such a meeting in the West). Among the supporters of a union were Bessarion, a distinguished theologian recently made bishop of Nicaea, and Isidore, who had just been named bishop of Kiev and All Russia; those opposed to union included Markos Evgenikos, then the bishop of Ephesos. The dispute was, of course, fundamentally theological and – as always – cultural, but in the 1430s a new element had emerged, the intellectual power of the Italian Renaissance and its fascination with all things Greek. This intellectual excitement was appealing to some Byzantine theologians, while to others it was yet another sign that the westerners were happy to take things from the Greeks but unwilling to understand the needs of the empire or the importance of the Byzantine theological tradition. The lay leaders of the Byzantine delegation were at least as distinguished as the clerics, including the emperor John himself, his brother Demetrios – and, most notably, Plethon; they were accompanied by Plethon's friend, the theologian and lawyer Georgios Scholarios, the Platonist Amiroutzes, and the Aristotelian Georgios of Trebizond.

The Byzantine party arrived in Venice, to a great welcome, early in 1438, and made its way to Ferrara, and the council began its deliberations in early April of that year. The discussion was generally on a high level, but difficult for both sides; debate dragged on and the cost to the papacy mounted, so that at the end of 1438 the council was transferred to Florence, where the wealthy Medici family was willing to help underwrite the cost. The major differences between

the two sides were essentially the same as before: the procession of the Holy Spirit and the supremacy of the pope. Some of the Byzantine prelates objected that it was unfair that they be expected to give in on all points, and some sources suggest that they were essentially starved into submission. In the end, the patriarch and all the Byzantine prelates – except for Markos Evgenikos – signed a statement of union on July 5, 1439; of the secular representatives, only the emperor had to agree.

The schism had formally been healed, but most of the bishops and the laity in the East remained steadfastly opposed to the union, and Markos Evgenikos became a popular hero for his resistance. In return for agreement to what came to be called the Union of Florence, the pope agreed to send an army (i.e., a crusade) to defend Constantinople from the Turks. Almost immediately, however, difficulties emerged in the East as many bishops opposed the union and some of those who had signed began to change their mind. As mentioned above, the leader of the resistance was Evgenikos, but when he died Georgios Scholarios took his place.

Meanwhile, Murad II continued his conquests in the northern Balkans. Smederevo fell in 1439, Belgrade in 1440, and in 1441 the Ottomans invaded Transylvania. The crusade promised at the Council of Ferrara–Florence was hastened by these events, and the forces of the papacy, Venice, and the duke of Burgundy promised to set sail in 1444. This was also supported by those who offered resistance to the Ottomans in eastern Europe, among them the Polish king Ladislas III, who had become ruler of Hungary, and the Hungarian general John Hunyadi. In addition, a local leader had emerged in Albania, a warrior raised as a Muslim and given the name “Iskender bey” (Alexander) by the sultan for his prowess. Skanderbeg, as he was known by the Albanians, escaped from Ottoman control and organized resistance from the mountain fastness of his homeland. At the same time, Constantine, despot of the Morea and brother of John VIII, organized the defenses of the Peloponnesos and seized Athens from the weak Florentine family of the Acciajuoli.

In July of 1443 the long-awaited crusade finally set off from Hungary, while a western fleet sailed up the Danube from the Black Sea. Murad II was busy with a revolt in Anatolia, and the crusaders were able to march quickly south and take Niš and Sofia. In 1444 the western leaders sent ambassadors to the sultan and a truce was arranged for ten years. Durad (George) Branković, the despot of Serbia, kept his part of the bargain, but the emissaries of the pope, along with King Ladislav, broke the treaty and marched further into Ottoman territory,

reaching the Black Sea near Varna. Murad returned quickly from Anatolia, outwitted the crusader fleet, and arrived at Varna with a huge army which annihilated the outnumbered Christian force. Thus ended the Crusade of Varna and any real hope that Byzantium would receive help from the West. At the same time, many Byzantines realized that the goal of the crusade was Constantinople and they felt a real sense of relief when it came to a bad end. John VIII could do nothing more than congratulate the sultan on his victory. John Hunyadi remained at large, with a fairly large army, but he was decisively defeated at the second Battle of Kosovo in 1448. Branković survived these difficulties with much of his power intact, but Byzantium had fallen to a level of virtual insignificance in world politics. The efforts of John VIII to secure support from the West had failed completely, and on October 31, 1448, he died.

The Fall of the City

John VIII had no children, and he apparently thought long and hard about his successor. In the end he chose his brother Constantine, who was then 44 years old and despot of the Morea. Constantine was clearly the most talented and ambitious of his brothers and had demonstrated ability in his energetic actions to defend and develop the Morea. Frequently known by his mother's surname Dragas or Dragatzes, Constantine XI was destined to be the last emperor of Byzantium. In January of 1449 he was proclaimed emperor at Mystras and was never formally crowned by the patriarch, even after his arrival in Constantinople, in part because the patriarch was still loyal to the union with Rome, and the new emperor did not wish to encourage further dissent on this issue.

Constantine entered Constantinople in March 1449 and immediately sought the approval of his elevation from the sultan Murad. The emperor confirmed his brothers Thomas and Demetrios as co-rulers of the Despotate of the Morea, but they almost immediately began to quarrel among themselves over control of the region.

As mentioned, Constantinople remained divided over the issue of Union with Rome. The emperor formally approved the Union, since he continued to hope that it might somehow lead to military assistance from the West. Some of the members of the court energetically supported the emperor in this matter, while others were opposed but were willing to keep silent for the well-being of the state. The great majority of the clergy and the laity, however, were steadfast in their opposition. Leaders such as Georgios Scholarios, who had become a monk

with the name Gennadeios, and John Evgenikos, the brother of Markos, continued to maintain a position hostile to Rome. In 1451 the patriarch of Constantinople, Gregory III, grew tired of the controversy and he withdrew from the city and took refuge in Rome; the city was without a patriarch.

In this situation Byzantine diplomacy focused on the need to find a suitable wife for the emperor (his previous two wives had died), who might bring the empire a sizable dowry and an heir to the throne. Nothing ultimately came of this, but in February of 1451 the situation of the empire changed dramatically when Sultan Murad II died. He was succeeded by his son Mehmed II, who was then only 19 years of age. The new sultan already had considerable experience, since his father had no other surviving son and had left many affairs of state to Mehmed. These, however, had not all gone well, and many Christian rulers hoped that the sultan's youth and lack of earlier success would alleviate the threat they all felt from the power of the Ottomans. They were seriously mistaken.

Figure 15.4 Sultan Mehmed II. The personality and policies of Mehmed II have been widely discussed, and it is clear that his actions had far-reaching consequences, not only in terms of the conquest of Constantinople, but also in the institutions that were to govern the Balkans over the next 400 years. This portrait of the sultan by the Italian artist Gentile Bellini (1429–1507) depicts him very much as a Renaissance prince. National Gallery, London. Photo: Eric Lessing/Art Resource, NY.



The Byzantine government shared in this misconception and, when Mehmed was occupied with a revolt in Anatolia, sought to defend the claims of a weak pretender to the Ottoman throne. Mehmed reacted swiftly, told the Byzantines that they had broken the recent treaty they had signed, and, in the spring of 1452, began the construction of a great fortress on the European side of the Bosphoros: Rumeli Hisar (Roman Fortress) was to match Anadolou Hisar (Anatolian Fortress), built by Mehmed's grandfather Bayezid on the Asiatic shore, to complete the encirclement of Constantinople by the Turks.

It was clear that the sultan was preparing for a final assault on the city. In this situation Constantine could do little other than seek to store up provisions and make whatever appeals he could to the West. He made promises to Hungary and Aragon and attempted to elicit the assistance of the merchants of Ragusa. The great Italian maritime republics had essentially lost interest in the fate of Constantinople, in part because they had already made their own arrangements for the promotion of their trade with the Turks.

In October 1452 Cardinal Isidore arrived in Constantinople as papal legate. He brought along with him 200 archers from Naples to aid in the defense of the city, but his real goal was to have the Union of Florence formally proclaimed there. The anti-unionists, led by Gennadeios, resisted steadfastly, and at a meeting in

the imperial palace in November they were allowed to sign a formal statement of protest. But the emperor and the papal party persevered and, on December 12, 1452, a grand ceremony was held in Hagia Sophia in which Orthodox and Catholic clergy both participated, and the decrees of the Council of Ferrara–Florence were read out. The majority of the people continued to worship in the churches whose priests were opposed to the Union. In the words of Steven Runciman, “Had the union been followed quickly by the appearance of ships and soldiers from the West its practical advantages might have won it general support... But, as it was, they had paid the price demanded for Western aid, and they were cheated” (p. 72; see Nicol, *Last Centuries*, p. 377: “It seemed that, in the end, when their backs were to the wall, they had allowed the Latins to win the last round of the battle of wits that had begun with the Fourth Crusade”).

Within the city people were well aware of the coming siege. The great cannons of Rumeli Hisar could be heard up the Bosphoros, and in November 1452, when a Venetian ship failed to heed the order not to pass through the straits, it was sunk. The ship’s crew was brought before the sultan, who ordered that they be decapitated; he had the captain impaled and displayed his body along the roadside. Spirits in Constantinople must have been low, and the historian Doukas quotes the official Loukas Notaras as saying, “Better the Sultan’s turban than the Pope’s cap,” meaning that it would be better to surrender to the Turks than to depend on western assistance at the cost of agreeing to the Union of the churches and submission to the pope. Nonetheless, Constantine urged his citizens on, and he worked with them through the winter as they sought to patch up the walls of the city. The biggest danger, as he well knew, was the Turkish cannon. Gunpowder had been used in Europe for the past hundred years, but it had not been very effective in turning the tide of war. Both Constantine and Mehmed, however, were interested in the use of cannon. In 1452 a Hungarian engineer named Urban came to Constantinople

Box 15.1 *The Fearful Cannon*

Probably the greatest factor in the siege of Constantinople in 1453 was the battery of huge cannons that Mehmed II brought up against the aged city walls. As mentioned above, the Greek historian Laonikos Chalkokondyles tells us that the cannons were made by a Hungarian founder named Urban who had previously worked for the Byzantines, but when they could no longer pay his salary he offered his services to the sultan, who promptly put him to work on the artillery he hoped would take Constantinople.

The cannons were made in Adrianople and the whole of the sultan’s European army had to go to that city to bring them to the vicinity of Constantinople. After successful test-firing at Adrianople,

in which the first shot traveled over a mile, the cannons began their journey to Constantinople, drawn by 60 oxen, with a team of 2,000 men to keep the great weapons steady. The largest cannons were 26–7 feet (8–9 meters) long, with a bore of 30 inches (nearly 1 meter), wide enough for a grown man to crawl into. The Ottomans devised a tactic intended to instill fear in the hearts of the defenders. They placed two small cannons on either side of the huge cannons mentioned above. The smaller cannons were fired first and did what damage they could with their relatively small projectiles, weighing “only” half a talent each (about 14 kilograms or 30 pounds). Then the huge cannon was fired, using a ball that weighed perhaps 500 kilograms or 1,200 pounds (reports differ as to the size of the largest cannon balls). Chalkokondyles reports that the sound of the large cannon was so loud that it could be heard about five miles away. Naturally this cannon could not be loaded very quickly, so it was fired only seven times a day, with the first shot each day just before dawn. The smaller cannons were, apparently, fired between 100 and 120 times a day.

Not surprisingly, this bombardment had an effect and Chalkokondyles says that much of the outer wall was brought down, along with four of the towers. The Byzantines, for their part, had some cannon of their own, but the largest of these burst when it was first fired. The others were not small, apparently able to fire projectiles weighing one and a half talents, but the historian tells us that the vibrations from the firing did more damage to the walls than harm to the Turks.

Ultimately, much of the wall was battered down, but the defenders bravely raced out each evening to fill the breaches.

and offered the emperor his services; Constantine, however, had neither the funds to pay his salary nor the resources to allow him to build the weapon. Urban, therefore, turned his attention to the sultan; when he told Mehmed that he could build a cannon that would break the gates of Babylon itself, the sultan offered him a salary four times what he was asking and put at his disposal all the resources he would need. Urban constructed the massive cannon that sank the Venetian ship in the Bosphoros and then set about to construct one twice its size for the attack on Constantinople. Other cannons were built and sent to the siege, although none of them was as large as the first.

Meanwhile, the Sultan’s troops began to assemble around the city, marching overland, and eliminating every remnant of Byzantine resistance. The Greek historian George Sphrantzes claimed that the Turkish army numbered 200,000, while a more reasonable estimate is 80,000 men. Within the city there was a serious shortage of defenders: Sphrantzes put the number at 4,773. The Land Walls of the city, long the empire’s best defense, were in reasonably good condition, but they had two serious weaknesses: their very length (approximately four miles from the Sea of Marmara to the Golden Horn) made them difficult to defend with a small force, and their size and construction, although still formidable, had not been designed to withstand a gunpowder assault that had the power to break them down through unprecedented force.

The other hope of the city was the arrival of help from the outside. All too

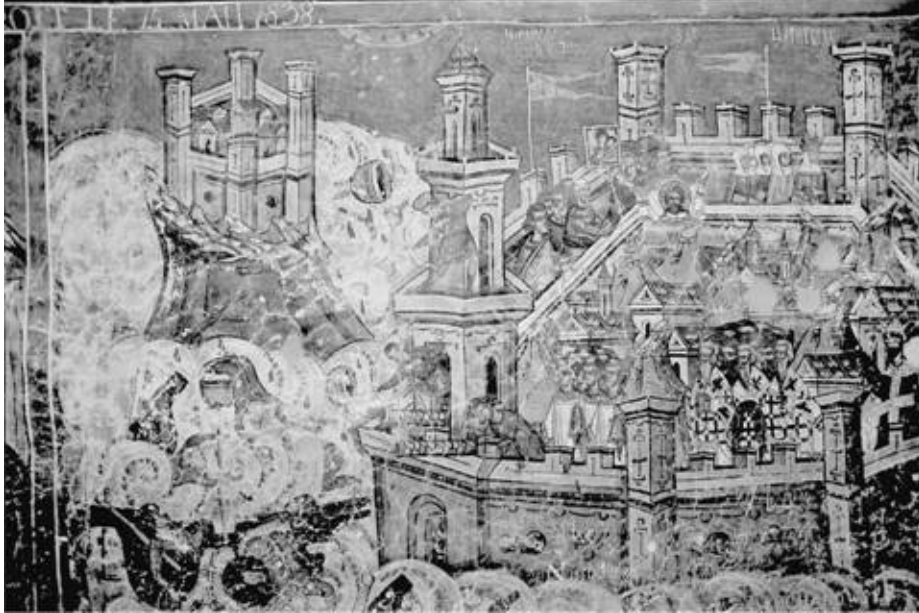
little was forthcoming. Mehmed ordered his general Turahan to cross into the Morea and ravage the countryside, preventing the despots from aiding their brother. The relatively weak Christian powers of the Balkans (Alphonso of Aragon, John Hunyadi of Hungary, and Durad (George) Brancović of Serbia) provided no assistance, and the European powers either were unable to provide aid or had lost interest. Aware of the lessons of history, Mehmed understood that Constantinople could be taken only by a power that controlled the sea, so he constructed a navy of considerable size to counter any attack from western maritime powers. Finally, in February 1453, Venice decided to send two ships to Constantinople, with 800 soldiers, and these set sail at last in April. The pope followed suit and said he would send five ships, and the Genoese one; assuming that these ships had been able to escape the Ottoman blockade, they were already too late, and their force was also too small to do anything to help the situation.

The defense of the city was entrusted to the grand duke (*megas doux*) Loukas Notaras, Demetrios and John Kantakouzenos, and Nikephoros Palaiologos, all of course under the overall command of the emperor. The Venetians of the city provided their full support, and many members of the Genoese and Catalan communities threw in their lot with the Byzantines. A number of adventurers appeared as well, most notable among whom was the Genoese Giovanni Giustiniani Longo, who was given general supervision of the defense along the Land Walls.

The Byzantines celebrated Easter of 1453 in relative peace, but on Easter Monday, April 2, the first elements of the sultan's army arrived before the Land Walls; the emperor at once ordered the great boom across the mouth of the Golden Horn to be put in place to seal the harbor from attack. On April 6 the artillery barrage began on the Land Walls; the Turks fired on the walls during the day and the defenders rushed out at night to repair the damage. The defenders had some successes: an attempt to force the boom at the Golden Horn was beaten off and likewise an attack on the Land Walls; on April 20 three Genoese ships commissioned by the pope, along with a freighter with a load of wheat from Alphonso of Aragon, were able to break through the Ottoman blockade and enter the Golden Horn.

Figure 15.5 Siege of Constantinople. This depiction of the siege of Constantinople, from the Romanian church of Moldovita, is actually meant to show the seventh-century siege by the Avars and Persians, but it is clear from the prominence of the cannon that the artist had the fifteenth-century siege more

directly in mind. Especially interesting is the appearance of bishops on the walls of the city, along with the Mandylion, prominently displayed in the back of the scene. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC (Ihor Sevčenko).



Given this state of affairs, Mehmed determined to take extraordinary action. He constructed a road behind Galata, from the Bosphoros to the Golden Horn; carts were placed on rails along the road, drawn by oxen, and the ships were loaded on the carts and transported into the Horn. The efforts of the defenders to set the ships afire came to naught, and on April 22 the Ottoman fleet appeared in the Horn; a huge pontoon was constructed and artillery set up on it. The defenders now had to consider the possibility of an attack at any point along the whole of the circuit of the city instead of being able to concentrate their attention on the Land Walls, and difficulties of communication naturally ensued. The Ottomans, by contrast, were able to bring to bear their overwhelming numerical superiority and to bombard the walls along the Horn, where they were structurally inferior.

The defenders held out resolutely, and the emperor was able to confiscate church and private wealth in order to buy food. In the meantime, the help the Byzantines sought from abroad almost arrived, not from the West but from the East, in the form of revolts from the sultan's subjects in Asia Minor. It became clear that the siege could not be prolonged indefinitely and that Mehmed would have to take the city or face a difficult situation in his own realms. He offered the emperor terms: the Byzantines could surrender the city peacefully and either

remain in Constantinople with the payment of tribute or leave and settle somewhere else. Despite the advice of some of his counselors, Constantine was determined to stay and fight with his people. With this response the sultan was now able under Muslim law to encourage his soldiers with the traditional right to plunder the city after its conquest.

On Monday, May 28, Mehmed gave his soldiers a day of rest, in preparation for a massive attack. In the city, the omens of doom were everywhere, but the people assembled in the evening at Hagia Sophia and all, including both supporters and opponents of the Union, the emperor and Cardinal Isidore, took part in the last Christian liturgy in the Byzantine capital.

The Ottoman attack began in the early hours of Tuesday, May 29. The poorly equipped Ottoman irregular troops attacked first in large numbers; wave after wave they struck the weakest sections of the Land Walls, but Giustiniani and his men held firm. As the better-armed regular troops took their place, the Turks also attacked the walls on the Golden Horn, but again the defense remained strong. The sultan then ordered the Janissaries to attack; these picked troops were well equipped and fresh and the fighting was thick and furious. Just before dawn Giustiniani was wounded and he was carried from the front line. Although his injuries were not fatal, the Genoese troops thought he was dying or that he was giving up the fight, and they pulled back. The Janissaries seized the moment and one of them reached the top of the wall. He was immediately struck down but others quickly followed. Even this attack, however, might have been thrust back, but at the same time a small body of Janissaries discovered that the small Kerkoporta Gate in the Land Walls had mistakenly been left open. The attackers rushed through, climbed up to the top of the wall and raised the Ottoman standard. The Turks pressed forward through the two breaches; they quickly opened other gates and their comrades swarmed in.

The emperor Constantine did what he could to rally his troops. Some left the field to defend their families. Others, like the emperor, rushed forward to meet the foe. Constantine removed his imperial regalia and met the Turks near the Gate of St. Romanos. He was never seen again.

Many of the Italians fled to their ships, and a few got away, but the majority of the inhabitants were left to their fate. The rape and pillage began immediately, as the soldiers of the sultan claimed their reward. Churches were despoiled, houses were ransacked, and the treasures that had escaped the plundering of the Crusaders now fell into the hands of the Turks: the ikon of the Virgin Odegetria, supposedly the work of St. Luke, was destroyed, jeweled covers were removed

from books before they were burned, and mosaics and frescoes were gouged and hacked. The survivors were rounded up and carried off as slaves, although many killed themselves rather than fall into the hands of the conquerors. There is no reliable account, but contemporary estimates held that 4,000 people were killed and 50,000 led into slavery. Christian legend maintained that Hagia Sophia, the Great Church of God, would not fall to the invaders, but that, as the infidels approached its doors, the Angel of God would appear and strike them down. Thus, some of the survivors rushed to the church and barred the doors. When the Turks arrived, they burst into the building, killing the old and infirm and taking the others prisoner. The priests of the church had, meanwhile, continued their celebration of the Christian liturgy uninterrupted by the fall of the city. According to tradition, as the Turks gained control of the church, the priests picked up the sacred vessels, the walls of the sanctuary opened, and the priests moved into the masonry of the building, from which they will emerge once more to resume the liturgy when the building again becomes a Christian church.

In the late afternoon, the sultan entered the city and ordered an end to the plunder, which had essentially already been accomplished. He rode to Hagia Sophia and offered mercy to those he found still huddling in the building. He ordered the cathedral to be immediately transformed into a mosque. Mehmed had a Muslim cleric climb into the pulpit and proclaim a Muslim prayer, and he himself ascended the altar of the former cathedral and worshiped Allah.

In the aftermath Mehmed demanded for himself the choicest of the plundered treasures and the most noble of the captives. Some of the latter he kept in his palace or gave to Muslim allies. He discovered a number of Byzantine aristocrats and administrators, including the grand duke Loukas Notaras and his family. At first the sultan treated all the prisoners with generosity, but he soon changed his mind and had all the males executed. Mehmed was especially concerned to discover the body of the emperor Constantine, in part because he wanted to make sure that he had not escaped to lead an uprising at a later time. Although a thorough search was made and severed heads and

Box 15.2 *Byzantium and the Italian Renaissance*

Close connections had always existed between Byzantium and Italy; indeed, much of southern Italy had been a Byzantine possession until the eleventh century. As a result, many important buildings and works of art in Italy and Sicily were strongly influenced by the Byzantine tradition. In the last century of the Byzantine Empire, however, and in the years following the fall of Constantinople, these connections increased and, perhaps ironically, as Byzantium weakened and

finally collapsed, Byzantine culture had a powerful impact on developments in Italy. This was, in part, the result of the strong economic relations between Byzantium and the Italian maritime republics.

The Byzantine impact on the Italian Renaissance was enormous and it is impossible to imagine the Renaissance without the participation of Byzantine scholars. The Greek language, of course, was essentially unknown in the medieval West, and as a result most of the works of Greek antiquity were unknown or known only through Latin (or Arabic) translations. The “rediscovery” of the Greek language effectively began in the fourteenth century, spurred on by the poet Petrarch (1304–74) and his disciple Boccaccio (1313–75), who translated the *Iliad* into Latin. In 1360 the first professor of Greek was appointed at the University of Florence, and in 1397 Manuel Chrysoloras attained that chair. Chrysoloras (ca. 1350–1415) was a remarkably talented individual, a true Renaissance man. He was a friend of the emperor Manuel II and undertook many diplomatic missions to the West, primarily to seek military aid. He was also a scholar of considerable ability and insight. He wrote a textbook on Greek grammar and an interesting *Comparison of Old and New Rome*, in which he demonstrated an interest in and sensitivity to the works of art in Rome (although he ultimately concluded that the “New Rome” – that is, Constantinople – was more beautiful). He was an accomplished teacher and in Italy he came into contact with scholars and students interested in learning Greek. Leonardo Bruni’s statement that Chrysoloras restored Greek literature to Italy is certainly an exaggeration, but he was important nonetheless.

Other Greek teachers followed Chrysoloras to Italy, frequently for diplomatic or commercial purposes. Perhaps the most influential of the early visitors was Plethon (ca. 1360–1452), who was a member of the Byzantine delegation to the Council of Ferrara–Florence in 1438–9. In Florence he had contact with Italian scholars and he discussed the ideas of Plato with them. This was a fundamental event for the development of the Renaissance, which from this point on saw Platonism as the basis of philosophy. Among those who attended these discussions was the Florentine politician Cosimo de’ Medici who in 1441 founded the Platonic Academy in Florence, the institution that is often seen as the most important in the development of Renaissance thought. The relationship between Byzantium and Italy was not one-sided, however, with Greek scholars only going to Italy. The Italians themselves began to come to Byzantium, in search of knowledge of the language but even more in order to bring back Greek books. In 1418, for example, the Sicilian Giovanni Aurispa went to Constantinople in order to study Greek and collect manuscripts. In 1423 Aurispa returned to Venice with 248 books by classical Greek authors, most of which were unknown to the West. Among these were the *Iliad*, the works of Demosthenes, Plato, and Xenophon, along with a tenth-century codex that includes seven plays of Sophocles, six of Æschylus, and the *Argonautica*.

After the fall of Constantinople many well-to-do Byzantines fled Constantinople and established themselves in Italy, especially in Venice, which in the 1470s had a population of some 4,000 Greeks. Among these immigrants were some scholars. John Argyropoulos went to Italy in 1456 on a diplomatic mission but he was offered the opportunity to teach Greek in Florence and he immediately accepted. Theodore Gaza of Thessaloniki taught at Ferrara, Naples, and Rome; Demetrius Chalkondyles of Athens at Padua, Florence, and Milan; and George of Trebizond in Rome. These scholars not only encouraged the study of ancient Greek authors among Italians (and westerners generally); they also carried out important research and publication themselves, including the translation of Greek works into Latin.

In some ways the most important of the Byzantine scholarly émigrés was Bessarion, who came from Trebizond and became a monk in Constantinople. He headed the Byzantine delegation at the Council of Ferrara–Florence and eventually became a Catholic. He was named a cardinal, settled in Italy, held many important ecclesiastical positions, and was even a serious candidate to become

pope on two occasions. He was a prolific scholar in his own right, writing in both Greek and Latin, and he founded an academy in Rome that produced translations of ancient Greek authors. He was an avid collector of Greek manuscripts and eventually willed his vast collection to Venice, where they became the core of the Marciana Library there. Venice was the location of the press established in the 1490s by Aldus Manutius. This publishing company issued most of the early printed editions of Greek and Latin classical works, dictionaries, and texts of Byzantine authors. Many of these were written, translated, or edited by Byzantine émigré scholars and they had a powerful effect on the spread of knowledge about both the Byzantine and the ancient worlds.

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bodies washed and examined, and although a corpse wearing stockings with an embroidered eagle was at first said to be that of the emperor, Constantine's body was never discovered. The fact that he apparently disappeared completely has given rise to the later tradition that sees him as the "Marble Emperor," who is not dead but waiting, somewhere out of time, to return and restore the Byzantine Empire.

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